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ABSTRACT

The study of self-concept in relation to deafness has both theoretical significance for the understanding of human development and practical implications for the treatment of deaf children. Five theoretical issues related to the study of deafness and self-concept have been suggested by the literature: (1) consequences for self-concept development attendant on delay of language acquisition; (2) the relationship between language and thought; (3) the influence of a paucity of early parent-child communication about self-concept; (4) the influence of deficient language on the child's ability to develop trust and the consequences for self-esteem; and (5) the relationship between negative societal views of handicap and development of self-esteem. Methodological problems, particularly in regard to the development of appropriate measures of self-esteem for use with deaf children cannot be overlooked. Two measures of self-concept in deaf children are a pictorial inventory and rating scales used by teachers with long-term observation opportunities. There is a need to develop more self-concept measures. (Author/KMF)

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SELF-CONCEPT, SELF-ESTEEM AND DEAFNESS: RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND FINDINGS

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Self-Concept, Self-Esteem and Deafness

Research Problems and Findings*

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The study of self-concept in relation to deafness has both theoretical significance for the understanding of human development and practical implications for the treatment of deaf children. The major consequence of early profound deafness is a delay in the acquisition of language, and in some cases continuing deficiencies in the deaf person's ability to manipulate the linguistic system utilized by the majority community in which they live and function. This linguistic delay is experienced, almost without exception, by all profoundly deaf children born to hearing families, and it is this particular case that shall be of concern in this brief paper.

There are several possible consequences for self-concept of this delay in language acquisition. From the theoretical perspective of George Herbert Mead (1934), the individual develops a self, and a self-concept as he takes the role of significant others vis-a-vis himself or herself. The self becomes an object to itself by means of the manipulation of symbols, that is, through language. Cooley (1902) expressed this symbolic interactionist perspective in his discussion of "the looking-glass self."

A second theoretical question for which deafness has relevance is that of the relationship between language and thought. Whether thought can occur in the absence of language is a philosophical issue that has been addressed by philosophers for centuries. A number of persons interested in deafness have discussed the possible insights that might flow from the

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study of deaf children (see Vernon, 1967). Furth (1966), for example, argues, on the basis of his research with deaf students, that thought can occur in the absence of language. However, Furth's research was conducted almost twenty years ago, before sign language was recognized as a language, and it is questionable whether his subjects were truly without language. In addition, the Piagetian tasks of classification and transfer, used by Furth for testing "thought" seem to be of a different order of abstraction than the "thought" required for conceptualization of the self interacting with significant others. Numerous investigators interested in questions of deafness and personality development have observed that many deaf persons are deficient in the quality of "empathy" (Levine, 1956; Altshuler, 1974). This quality would seem to be a different way of expressing the ability to take the role of the other.

A third aspect of the relationship between language and self-concept that is of theoretical and practical significance is the influence that the early absence of parent-child communication may have on parents' feelings about the child that are translated into negative regard of parent for child, based on frustration, guilt and anger (Meadow, 1968; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972). Schlesinger has suggested that parental feelings about the handicap of deafness may be translated into an inability of children to resolve some of the critical developmental tasks outlined by Erikson (1963) as crucial for optimal personal development.

Societal definition of "handicap" in negative terms may be translated to those with disabilities later in life, if not in the most formative years, with implications for self-concept and for self-esteem.

Five theoretical issues have been suggested as possible linkages in the investigation of deafness and self-concept: the examination of self-concept

development in the absence of language; the investigation of the role of language in thought about the self; the examination of the influence of deficient communication on parental feelings about the deaf child, and the translation of these feelings to the child's view of herself; the influence of deficient language on the child's ability to develop trust, independence, etc., with possible consequences for self-esteem ; the relationship of negative societal views of the handicap of deafness and possible consequences for self-esteem and for self-concept.[1]

Methodological considerations -- Just as the linguistic deficit associated with deafness makes the investigation of self-concept in deaf persons particularly interesting, it is the linguistic deficit that makes this investigation particularly difficult. If it is the conscious or "phenomenal" self (Wylie, 1974; 1979) that we wish to address, we want to understand how subjects experience themselves -- their "global feelings of self-worth." This means reliance on self-report measures which may be quite unreliable or invalid if language level and understanding are problematic. It can also be problematic to use instruments that were developed and normed on normally hearing populations with groups of deaf persons. An example of these difficulties in relation to self-image research with deaf students is the case of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale. Garrison, Tesch and DeCaro (1978) administered the TSCS to entering students at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, who were re-tested two weeks later. It was reported that score stability over time was related to level of reading comprehension, which was related to favorable scores as well. Subsequently, a sub-group of students was interviewed regarding their interpretation of statements included in the TSCS. The investigators concluded that subjects had limited understanding of both the questions posed and the implications of various

response choices. Analysis of test items revealed that 33 of the 100 items were characterized by at least one of the linguistic structures suggested by Rudner (1978) as providing bias against deaf respondents.

Another example of linguistic difficulties faced in research with deaf respondents can be found in an attempt to use the Twenty Statements Test with a deaf population.

> The deaf students (ages 13 to 21) were quite serious in taking the test, but they encountered difficulty. . .because it required them to formulate and write responses rather than check alternative answers. Some students were unable to write twenty statements. . . Unless the linguistic handicap is understood by the Investigator, many of the statements given by deaf respondents do not make sense (Titus, 1965: 17).

An excellent review of the literature on self-concept and deafness by Garrison and Tesch (1978) cites studies using sociometric techniques (Craig, 1965), drawings of a human figure test (Myklebust, 1960), paper and pencil tests (Brunschwig, 1936), Q-sort techniques (Schwartz, Ross & Houchins, 1975), the semantic differential (Green & Shepherd, 1975; Blanton & Nunnally, 1964), self-concept of academic ability (Joiner, Erikson, Crittenden & Stevenson, 1969), and the Tennessee Self-Concept Test (Sussman, 1973). The authors of the review find the diversity of measurement devices encouraging, but conclude that "each of these methodologies seems to have generated more concern over the validity of research findings than actual confidence" (Garrison & Tesch, 1978: 464).

I have been struggling with the problem of measurement of self-esteem in deaf children for a number of years. Some years ago, I developed a pictorial inventory in an attempt to surmount the language barriers that

are present. A second approach that I have utilized is that of rating scales to be used by teachers and others who have long-term opportunites to observe the behaviors of deaf children. The pictorial inventory contains three positive and three negative adjective descriptors for which even very young deaf children are likely to know signs: good, polite, smart, lazy, silly, ugly. Children are asked to describe themselves as, for example, very very smart, very smart, a little smart, or not smart. Then they are asked how significant others would describe them: their mothers, fathers, teachers, counselors, boys at school, girls at school, and "hearing people."

Originally, this inventory was administered to 58 pairs of deaf children attending a residential school. Pairs were matched for age, sex, hearing loss, and IQ score. One member of each pair had deaf parents, the other member had hearing parents. The deaf children with deaf parents had significantly higher, more positive scores on the pictorial self-image inventory than did the deaf children with hearing parents. Teacher and counselor evaluations of self-esteem and adjustment to deafness showed the same significant differences, favoring students with deaf parents (Meadow, 1969). Later, this study was expanded to include a group of 56 deaf students attending day schools, all ofwhom had hearing parents (Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972). The average self-image inventory scores for the day pupils were almost identical with those of the residential school pupils with hearing parents -- significantly less positive than the scores of the residential pupils with deaf parents. Positive relationships were found between scores on the self-image inventory and family climate, school achievement, and communicative abilities.

This pictorial self-image inventory was utilized with students at the Kendall Demonstration Elementary School in connection with an evaluation

of curriculum development for a decision-making unit of a career education project. Twenty students exposed to these materials and thirty additional students equated for age and academic achievement were tested at the beginning of the six-week instruction period and again six weeks later. Scores at Time 1 and at Time 2 on the sum of the six adjectives were correlated .75 for the control group and .54 for the experimental group. Differences between the scores of the two groups were almost non-existent at Time 1; the experimental group scored significantly higher than did the control group at Time 2.

During the next year my research unit plans some additional developmental work on the pictorial inventory, with some studies of reliability and validity using larger groups of deaf students of various ages.

A second kind of self-image measure with which I have worked is evaluations by teachers and other adults in the deaf child's environment. Over the past three years, this self-image dimension has been included in a more general social-emotional assessment inventory, in collaboration with Michael Karchmer, Linda Petersen and Lawrence Rudner at Gallaudet College. Of the 59 items in this inventory (Meadow, Karchmer, Petersen & Rudner, 1980) 23 are included in the scale named "self-image". (An additional 23 items are included in a scale named "social adjustment" and another 13 items in a scale named "emotional adjustment.") Norms have been developed for the three scales, based on inventories completed on more than 2,000 students enrolled in special educational programs for deaf children. Girls were seen by their teachers as demonstrating more positive self-images than were boys [$\tilde{E}$ (1, 1737) = 11.38, p = .00]. Younger students were seen as demonstrating more positive self-images than older students [$\tilde{E}$ (4, 1737) = 3.22, p = .01]. The significant break in age groupings was between the 13 to 15-year-olds and the 16 to 18-year-olds. No significant differences

were found in self-image between students enrolled in residential schools and those enrolled in day programs.

It is clear that there are many important questions to be addressed in the area of deafness and self-image, and that there are few measurement techniques that seem satisfactory. In addition to the theoretical issues that are relevant to social and behavioral scientists, there are many important practical issues as well. Some of these relate to educational curricula that schools are developing in the areas of social and emotional functioning. The mandate of Public Law 94-142 to meet the needs of handicapped children in all areas of development has stimulated activity in this area. Clinicians working with deaf children and their families could benefit from increased understanding of the dynamics of self-image in deaf children from a developmental perspective. There are few areas of research endeavor in which more practical use could be made of research findings.

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[1] Following the lead of Rosenberg (1965) and of Wells and Marwell (1976), I differentiate between "the self" or "self-concept" and "self-image" or "self-esteem." The former two terms denote a generalized version of the individual's formulation of himself/herself; the latter terms include the notion of a global evaluation of that self. Thus, self-image or self-esteem is seen as a sub-set of attitudes about the self.

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